

Willy Becker and the Great White Throne

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Stealing that pack of Vogue cigarettes was the bravest sin Willy Becker had ever done. It took him several weeks to get up the nerve for it, weeks of squirming under all kinds of eyes—especially God’s eyes—weeks of pushing hellfire out of sight, out of mind, as they say.

Not only that. In the entrance to the South Church the minister had hung a poster advertising a week of revival meetings with Rev. Henry Derksen from Nebraska, a handsome preacher whose smile Willy tried not to think about either while he had organized his sin. All in all, he was quite busy for a week or two, trying hard to maintain his resolve to smoke while also showing a more or less normal face at home.

And then to find he couldn’t smoke those Vogues after all—well, his courage took a bit of a loss there when he crumpled them to pieces and heaved them into a poplar bush in a fit of fright, and ran himself to exhaustion while Rev. Derksen’s hellfire burned back from wherever Willy had pushed it during those days. He didn’t know how he managed to go home that evening and eat supper. But his sister was sick that day and his mother fretted over it, while his father was preoccupied with something that wouldn’t come together in the workshop; so Willy swallowed his *tjieltje* and went up to his bedroom, and nobody suspected what a monstrous sinner had just been sitting at the family table.

But lying in bed that night at the age of eleven years, Willy surrendered. He would have to go forward when Henry Derksen issued the altar call.

The resignation had accompanied him during the next few days, and once in a while he almost felt peaceful. Occasional disobedience did break through, like the day his father was out of town and his mother found a mouse trapped in the cellar of the house. She pleaded with Willy to get rid of it—she had a terrible incomprehensible fear of mice—and was uncommonly kind to him when he did it. He went out to the woodpile to fetch a stick, and returned to the house and asked his mother for a paper bag. In the cellar the mouse blinked as it hunched in the half-darkness, caught by the tail and still very much alive and otherwise unhurt. Willy clubbed it till it twitched its last; then he picked up the trap and emptied it into the bag without touching the mouse. Mrs. Becker stood at the top of the cellar stairs and praised him fervently as he came up.

“Oh Willy, you’re so good to do this. I’m going to tell dad when he gets home how you helped me today.”

Willy thought, yeah, OK. But in the back alley he dumped the dead mouse in the grass and thought, “If I’m so good, why do I have to get saved?”

The disobedience passed. A few hours of mother’s gratitude wouldn’t save him from hell, even he knew that; and he knew very well how hell goes on forever. He looked at the little carcass in the grass and was divided between his mother’s strange affection and God’s uncompromising whiteness. “All your righteousness is like filthy rags——.” In last year’s revival Rev. Derksen had quoted this verse from the Bible and shocked the South Church by saying that in the original Hebrew this really meant a woman’s dirty Kotexes, although he didn’t say that word, but everybody knew exactly what he meant. No matter what you do, you’re no good, the evangelist had made that much clear at least.

Henry Derksen was young, and handsomer than Willy ever expected to be. He came from Omaha somewhere in the States, and when he wasn’t preaching he had a smile that endeared him to the whole South Church, the same smile he had on the poster letting everybody know he was coming again. And the old people liked it even better when Rev. Derksen stood in the pulpit with his floppy black bible and looked somber. He was just as good at letting Jesus and judgment take over from the smiles, that’s how he got away with talking about Kotex right there underneath the PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD motto. He knew how to separate sinners from christians the way Moses parted the Red Sea with his rod, and back-sliding christians from real ones. Henry Derksen knew everything down to the difference between the great white throne and the judgment seat of Christ.

“Personally,” he said to the people last year—his smile left out in the parking lot somewhere beside Abe Willems’s ’59 Chev with the big fins—“I would rather endure all the horrors of the great white throne than to be a christian at the judgment seat with no trophy to lay before the Savior’s feet.” Willy looked into the grass and saw that a dead mouse in the alley wasn’t the sort of trophy Rev. Derksen meant, no matter how happy Mrs. Becker was about it.

Willy’s biggest concern was to escape the white throne, to be counted among those who were prepared to meet their God. He’d have to worry about the trophy

later. He had seen pictures of the throne in a magazine he got from the Back to the Bible Broadcast. It was an awesome thing in front of the lake of fire where contorted bodies were driven down into liquid sulphur, to join hordes of heads bobbing there with bulging eyes and mouths shrieking for one more chance. "If you're saved and you know it say Amen (Ay-men!)"—a chorus from last summer's bible camp sang into Willy's head as he stared at the mouse; "If you're saved and you know it clap your hands (Clap, clap); if you're saved and you know it then your life will surely show it." and he remembered how the saved campers had thrown one stump after another into the campfire and testified about their escape from the throne. Even if some of them were phoney—Neil Dirks, for example, said he was saved and right away Willy thought about the picture of the naked woman hidden up in Neil's hayloft—there in a little clearing in a bush beside Shellfish Lake, while an owl hooted somewhere in the darkness beyond the fire, Willy understood again how the world is really divided. But he hadn't testified himself, because he wasn't sure he was saved even though he'd sung along with the chorus.

He killed the mouse and his mother was glad, and it wasn't enough.

Every day since stealing the Vogues he had tried to have fun, but nothing was really funny. Today, Saturday, his mother had sent him to the shoemaker to get new heels nailed onto a pair of shoes. Old Mr. Lenz drew hard on a cigarette holder clamped at the edge of his mouth while he repaired the heels, and Willy saw only shoes walking toward the throne carrying him and all the village's smokers with them, although it looked like Mr. Lenz never thought about such things. Mouse traps and gopher traps spoke plainly about death and beyond. Afterwards Willy went to the little meadow beside the railway tracks for comfort, but the crocuses were long gone, and the prairie sage smelled too pungent among the dry grass, and summer's heat was a forecast of the lake of fire. Even when an occasional rose wafted sweet aches over him reminding him of Rose in Grade Six whom he loved, tomorrow Henry Derksen was coming again, that was the thing.

The South Church called it a revival. If it had just been an evangelistic crusade Willy might have been exempt, since he had already tried to get saved after that campfire last summer:

Into my heart, into my heart,
come into my heart, Lord Jesus,
Come in today, come in to stay....

And the Sunday School teacher had made him feel very good when he repeated her prayer; he was sure he'd go straight to heaven then if he died after ten years in this wicked world. And it had made his mother so happy when he told her about it, more or less like the day he killed the mouse, so happy that he really had imagined it was done once and for all.

Now the last day was done. Late Saturday night Willy turned over in bed, knowing the Omaha preacher wouldn't honor the distinction between evange-

lism and revival anyway. Saved or lost, everybody needed something fixed, nobody was inoculated against the need to go forward along the church aisle, and he, Willy, was especially sinful. What Neil Dirks and others needed to do was their own business—his business was with the Vogues and the red earringed temptress on the yellow package, and he had to cure himself forever of her who had tempted him even more than Peggy Hinz in the bedroom that Sunday night he took down his pants for her after church. He had stolen the temptress and still couldn't smoke her; it weighed him down and he couldn't sleep. Rose, who had heated him with her smile when he sold the gopher tails to her father, the municipal reeve, couldn't quench this fire even when he tried hard to imagine her smiling back. He had to go to the altar, that's all, a failed repentant smoker who never properly saw Peggy's panties though she had stared so hard at his homemade shorts, because *Thou God Seest Me* and there is no way around that.

Willy tossed in bed and imagined Sunday. If he's saved he doesn't know it, his life has surely failed to show it; he's probably not saved at all, but maybe next summer he'll be able to stamp his feet at the campfire and really mean it; if you're saved and you know it stamp your feet (Stamp, stamp!).

His little sister turned in her crib along the opposite wall. His father snored from the next room, and somewhere outside a distant dog barked. Hoods careered toward Main Street in a souped-up car, going to shoot pool at the Variety Shop, probably. Willy tried to imagine the inside of the place. Or maybe the hoods were going to a dance at the Community Hall with Lutherans and Catholics and hoods from other towns.....

The bible brooded on the bookshelf beside him. Unless you're born again, killing that mouse will not get you into the kingdom of heaven; and God so loved the world that he killed his son, and if you, Willy Becker, don't believe it you will perish; you're going to confess with your mouth; otherwise the lake of fire will have room for you forever.

The lines petered out, but sleep came hard. After a long time some waves began washing over him—but suddenly his father was sitting on the toilet a few feet away getting rid of pent-up gas and paralyzing Willy in the dark. His father had been saved years ago, and only had to worry now about powdering the cabbages in the garden, or what's the matter with the gears in the washing machine wringer, and will I get my moose when hunting season opens in fall? Willy's parents didn't want him and his sister and a few distant relatives to go to hell and so Mr. Becker prayed for them every morning at breakfast: "Give them no peace nor rest until they come to Thee." Otherwise hell didn't concern them personally.

Willy tossed himself toward the east wall when his father finally went back to bed. More time passed, and the sloping ceiling overhead began to feel like a tent; then a dreamy rose wafted the bad gas away, and after a while there seemed to be a lot of people in the Community Hall, with a huge choir onstage singing Hallelujah for the Cross. The choir was so big it needed two conductors to stand among the singers; those at the front couldn't see the conductors at all, but

peered out toward the audience sitting in front of them in the darkened hall. Willy was in the choir too, off to one side near the wings, and it seemed maybe one of the conductors was Rev. Henry Derksen, but for such a big choir the singing sounded sort of feeble....

The next thing he knew it was Sunday morning. Breakfast was on the stove. The choir faded to nothing as Willy made his way downstairs to sit at the table with his sins, knowing again what had to be done about them. The pink plastic radio on top of the fridge was broadcasting The Old-fashioned Revival Hour from Pasadena, California. The family bowed their heads, and Willy's father prayed for the lost relatives and picked up his spoon while Mrs. Becker served the porridge. His little sister seemed to be feeling much better. Only Willy needed to be saved or revived, or whatever that thing was called that he had to do.